

Keeping the village school open: community-run public education in rural Poland

In many European rural regions, demographic decline and fiscal constraints are increasingly challenging the viability of small local schools. In Poland, a legal mechanism introduced in 2009 allows municipalities to transfer small public primary schools — typically enrolling fewer than 70 pupils — to non-governmental operators, such as associations, foundations, or private individuals, rather than closing them. In practice, these transfers often occur when rural schools face potential liquidation or organisational downgrading, making community involvement a key factor in maintaining local educational provision.

This paper examines publicly funded schools operated by non-local government entities in rural Poland between 2010 and 2025. It asks how widespread this organisational model has become and whether community-run schools can maintain stable educational provision over time. The study approaches school transfers as locally embedded institutional responses shaped by demographic pressures, municipal decision-making and community mobilisation.

The research combines quantitative analysis of nationwide datasets derived from public statistics and the Polish Ministry of Education with qualitative case studies of selected association-run schools. Statistical analysis identifies temporal developments and spatial differentiation in the emergence of 'transferred' schools, while semi-structured interviews with representatives of associations and foundations provide insight into governance practices, financial arrangements and relations between schools and local communities.

The discussion draws on concepts of social and territorial capital to interpret how local organisational capacity and collective action influence the persistence of educational institutions in peripheral areas. By focusing on efforts to keep village schools open, the paper evaluates whether community-run public education constitutes a durable institutional arrangement or a context-dependent response to rural demographic shrinkage.